

An accidental victory  
The U.S. has an advantage in Central Asia -- but maintaining it will take great care.  
By TIMOTHY RYAN  
Special to [the Star-Telegram](#)

In seeking to engage and defeat al Qaeda in September 2001, the U.S. military was confronted with a geographical problem. Al Qaeda's leaders were entrenched in strongholds in the landlocked, mountainous nation of Afghanistan where they thought, with justification, that they were largely insulated from direct attacks by American military might.

The keys to unlock the Afghanistan puzzle were found in the neighboring nations of Central Asia. Newly independent states that had suffered under Soviet domination for most of the previous century, these nations opened their airspaces and offered use of their bases to the United States, expanding the American strategic footprint in the region in ways unimaginable just a few years earlier.

These new relationships have been essential to thwarting al Qaeda's larger strategic goals and, if properly maintained in the coming years, also will prove essential to thwarting other strategic threats to U.S. interests in the region.

The Strategic Energy Ellipse (SEE) is a region of extreme strategic importance to the United States. It stretches from the northern shore of the Caspian Sea to the southern terminus of the Persian Gulf. Within this region are oilfields that hold approximately 70 percent of the world's proven reserves of crude oil and gas fields that hold about 40 percent of the global natural gas reserves. Any group, nation or coalition of nations able to dominate this region would hold the keys to domination of a world economy dependent on these fuels.

Strategically, the United States cannot allow such a domination to occur. This is what is at stake in the region, and all the concerns about Iraq and Afghanistan must take a back seat to this larger consideration.

Currently, there are three potential threats to domination of the SEE:

A pan-Islamic coalition of states that rises in a new caliphate under the banner of al Qaeda.

A hegemonic Iran dominating the Persian Gulf and southern Caspian.

A revived, imperialist Russia or a Russo-Sino coalition.

The great foreign policy achievement of the Bush administration will be remembered as the defeat of the first of these threats and the containment of the second, with the potential building blocks in place to confront the third.

In retrospect, the idea that the Islamic world in total was going to flock to Osama bin Laden as a new caliph seems far-fetched. However, on the afternoon of Sept. 11, 2001, that idea had to be taken seriously.

Nearly six years later, it is clear that this possibility has been thoroughly defeated. Al Qaeda remains a genuine danger to U.S. and Western citizens and interests, but it is no longer a serious threat to capture the region. Similarly, in orchestrating this strategic defeat of al Qaeda, the U.S. has created a functional superstructure of containment around Iran.

Although Iran can still attack at the gaps -- through Hamas, Hezbollah and allied militias in Iraq -- it has no real strategic outlet and is, in fact, physically surrounded. The United States has military forces in, or access agreements with, every nation in physical contact with Iran.

Indeed, many of those nations are more fearful of a resurgent Persian empire than what they see ultimately as transient American interests. Paradoxically, the stronger Iran gets, the tighter becomes the coalition against it.

The challenge for the remainder of the Bush administration, and for the next president, will be to foster this currently informal superstructure into a formal alliance that can serve to permanently check any future Iranian drives for hegemony. As this alliance solidifies, it will also serve as a check against any Russian or Chinese drive to dominate the region.

Russia and China apprehend this situation themselves and are trying to form a counter-alliance in the region. They have joined with several of the Central Asian nations that are working with the United States in a structure called the Shanghai Cooperation Council. Thus far, the U.S. has a slight edge in this competition for favor as the only one of the three great powers with military access to the countries, but that could change without great care being taken in preserving these relationships.

This is an accidental victory for the United States. The outcomes outlined above have not been the results of a coherent, purposeful strategy pursued by the Bush administration. Rather, they appear to have happened on an ad hoc basis, pursued primarily by military planners who needed bases from which to attack al Qaeda.

Metaphorically, the ideological strategists of the Bush administration have been playing checkers; the professional military men and women have been playing chess. Looking eight moves ahead like a chess grandmaster, we can see that if we make all the proper moves, Iranian goals are already checkmated.

Unfortunately, the Russians might already be eight moves beyond that. In the remaining months of the Bush administration, and in the foreign policy of the next presidency, the game must be raised to one of three-dimensional chess to match the over-the-horizon threat of a Russian play for domination of the region.

Timothy Ryan is a geographer, statistician and research coordinator at Infotech Information and Research Consultants in Los Angeles. [timryan5749@yahoo.com](mailto:timryan5749@yahoo.com)